

Jallianwala Bagh Revisited



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“A look at the actual history of one of the most shocking events of the independence struggle.”

In 1903, only 16,000 Indians the posts with salaries higher than Rs 75 a month. In legal profession, failures were frequent and journalism at that was a pretty precarious profession. Number of unemployed graduates was on the rise. But even more frustrating was the huge wastage arising from failures at examination. It was among these 'unemployable' graduates that frustration was very prevalent. The Congress had become an elitist organization to whom India meant few hundred lawyers only. Even those did not bear

much fruit. The youth was no longer attracted to their methods of petitions. Italy's defeat at the hands of Ethiopia and Russia's at hands of Japan proved false all claims of white superiority over the Africans and Asians. Lord Curzon's repressive policies turned the frustration of Indians into anger. He increased the official control over the Indian Universities through a statutory Act and hence crushed the education autonomy in the name of educational reforms. Law classes and Second grade colleges were abolished. Fees were hiked beyond Indians' capabilities. Press was murdered. His Officials Secrets Acts (Amendment) Act was aimed at protecting the oppressive officials from public criticism. He spent Indian money lavishly on foreign missions, Delhi durbar and the Tibetan Expedition. He refused to reduce the land tax. Finally came of Partition of Bengal along communal lines. All these events gave rise to an era of revolutionary terrorism.

Revolutionary Terrorists took to bombs and the pistol and individual acts of terrorism. The British, they felt, must be overthrown by force. They preferred to follow in the footsteps of Irish terrorists and Russian Nilhists and assassinate individuals. The idea was to strike terror in their heart. An attempt was made on the Viceroy's life. A district magistrate was shot and the acts were repeated in many other cases too.

In the spring of 1919, the Punjab was at crossroads of History. The War was over already. A search of new India had begun. Handsome concessions were expected from our masters for helping them in their Great War. Montague Chelmsford Reforms had only disappointed us. But there was something more in the offing.

The Rowlatt Committee formed to examine the revolutionary activities between 1905 to 1918, suggested certain measures of arbitrary arrest without trial, internment and restriction of movement of persons suspected of anti-government activities. The Judges were empowered to try political cases without jury. The Rowlatt Bills were passed in spite of unanimous Indian opposition. This brought an end to Gandhi's patience. He called for a general strike on 6th April, the day the bill became the law of the land. The people of Punjab had been excited over war loans and Governor O' Dwyer's harsh methods of recruitment. The Muslims were deeply affected by Khilafat propaganda. Around 150,000 participated in Amritsar alone. No incident of violence was reported from Indians' end. Europeans could and did walk the streets unmolested, affirms the Hunter Commission Report. On 9th April, the Punjab

government issued order of deportation from the province of two Congress party Leaders- Dr. Satyapal- a hindu and Dr. Saiffudin Kitchlew- a moslem. It was the day of Ram Naumi, a sacred Hindu festival. The crowd kept shouting "Hindu-muslim ki Jai, Gandhi Ji ki Jai" .The police expected the demonstrators would try to liberate and two leaders. But "there was no such attempt", writes Hunter in his report. But the banishing of the two leaders angered the populace. The result was a mob fury at Amritsar, where following a police firing some officials were killed and two British women injured. Two days later, Brigadier General Edward Harry Dyer arrived at Amritsar. On 12th April, he issued a proclamation prohibiting processions and meetings. "But it appears that no steps were taken for its publication" writes Hunter. Few People defiantly assembled next day in Jallianwala Bagh while others came to attend annual Baisakhi fair. Being from outside

villages many were unaware of the draconian proclamation. Then the account given by the report of the tragedy is horrifying. "About 1 O' clock, he came to know about the meeting scheduled at 4:30. General Dyer, entered the area and blocked the exits and opened fire at the crowds to produce a "moral effect" and to create in the minds of Satyagrahis a feeling of terror. There is no evidence as to the nature of address the crowd was listening. None of them were provided with fire arms, although few were carrying sticks. 1650 rounds were fired by troops. The casualty was 1600."

The following exchange took place at the Hunter Committee hearings:

Excuse my putting it that way, General, but was it not a resort to what has been called "frightfulness" for the benefit of the Punjab district (sic.) as a whole?

I don't think so. I think it was a horrible duty for me to perform. It was a merciful act that I had given them the chance to disperse (that is, in the morning). The responsibility was very great. I had to make up my mind that if I fired, I must fire well and strong so that it would have its full effect.

And you did not open fire with the machine guns simply by the accident of the armoured cars not being able to get in?

I have answered you. I have said that if they had been there, the possibility is that I would have opened fire with them.

You had no information that even a single individual of the mob had a firearm?

No, they were going to do it with lathis. I know there were thousands of lathis in the railway station and they were going to be their arms.

Udham Singh who killed Michael O' Dwyer in 1940 was executed but his ashes were returned to India only in 1974. This is what he had to say to the trial court on why he killed former Punjab Lieutenant-Governor Michael O'Dwyer

He was the real culprit. He deserved it. He wanted to crush the spirit of my people, so I have crushed him.

Jallianwala Bagh Today:

Soon after the tragedy happened, a committee was formed under the Presidentship of Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya. To perpetuate the memories of martyrs, the park was acquired by the nation on 1st August 1920 at the cost of five lakh sixty thousand four hundred and seventy two rupees but the actual construction work of the park had to wait till the independence. A large flame shaped memorial, Designed by American architect Benjamin Polk, was inaugurated by the then President Dr Rajender Prasad in presence of Jawahar Lal Nehru on 13th April in 1961. The memorial is 45-foot red stone pillar was erected to pay homage to those thousands of innocent and helpless people. This monument is popularly known as the Jallianwala Bagh. Bullet marks can still be seen on the walls of the park.

As I plan to leave for Amritsar soon to salute those men and women on whose dead bodies we have built the monument of our freedom, I am being reminded of all these incidents. If you can, do visit the place at least once in your lifetime to relive the history

--Netra